

WHY THEY FOLLOW

Lessons in Church Communication
from That One Lost Sheep

MATTHEW WARNER

WORD^{on}FIRE.

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“Go after the one that is lost . . .”

—Luke 15:4

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Foreword

Uno the Sheep

You may not realize it yet, but you already know me. My name is Uno. I'm that one lost sheep from the Gospels. You know . . . the one the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go after? Hi.

I'm all around you, in the poor and the lonely. In the unloved and the hopeless. In our homes and pews. In everyone we meet, including in that lovely face you see in the mirror.

For over a decade now I've been working with Flocknote to help over ten thousand churches communicate with and lead their flocks (of all sheeps and sizes). In that time, we've learned a lot of lessons—what works, what doesn't, and the most common reasons churches are struggling to engage their people today.

Matthew Warner put the most important lessons we've learned along the way into this little book for you and your church to learn from. I helped. Well, I mostly just sheered him on. I promise he doesn't make as many sheep puns as I do (he's not as funny as me, bless him).

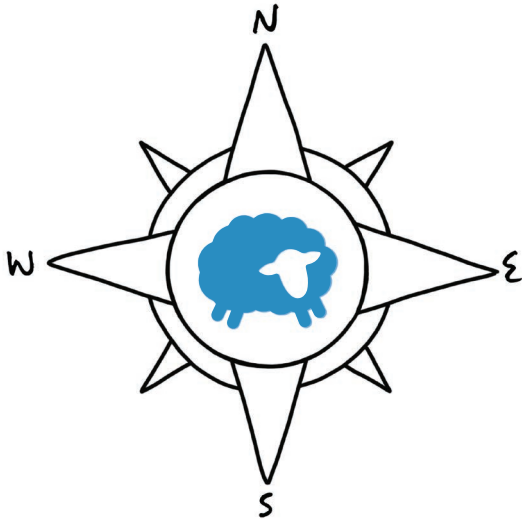
On behalf of the Flocknote team, I want to say thank you for the important work you do. Rest assured, we pray for you daily. I hope the lessons that follow will inspire you, challenge you, and greatly benefit your ministry as you go after those lost sheep, make disciples, and change the world.

*“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep
and losing one of them, does not leave the
ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after
the one that is lost until he finds it?”*

—Luke 15:4

PART I

GUIDING PRINCIPLES



CHAPTER ONE

Nobody Was There

Nobody was there. I was in shock. Here he was in the flesh—one of my heroes, a best-selling author and one of the most brilliant writers and thinkers of our time—speaking at my parish. Having had my life changed by dozens of his books, I was exceptionally eager to snag a good seat and hear what he had to say. Well, finding a seat wasn't the problem.

The church should have been standing room only, but instead I saw maybe thirty-five folks scattered amongst mostly empty pews. I knew there were thousands of people within ten miles who would have loved to be there. Where was everybody? Why weren't they there?

I quickly realized the reason nobody was there: Nobody knew about it. Because nobody had told them about it. It really was that simple. Our leaders simply didn't have an effective way to get important and timely information directly to most of the flock.

The spark from that moment lit a fire in my life that still burns to this day.

WHAT'S KEEPING YOU IN THE CHURCH?

Not long before that moment, I was on a snowboarding trip and sitting at the end of a long dinner table at a noisy restaurant. Seated at the opposite end of the table was a slightly older friend who everyone admired, though our worldviews were quite different. That evening, he asked me a question I will never forget and that changed my life forever. Very loudly in front of five to six other friends he asked, “Hey Matt, what’s keeping you in the Church?”

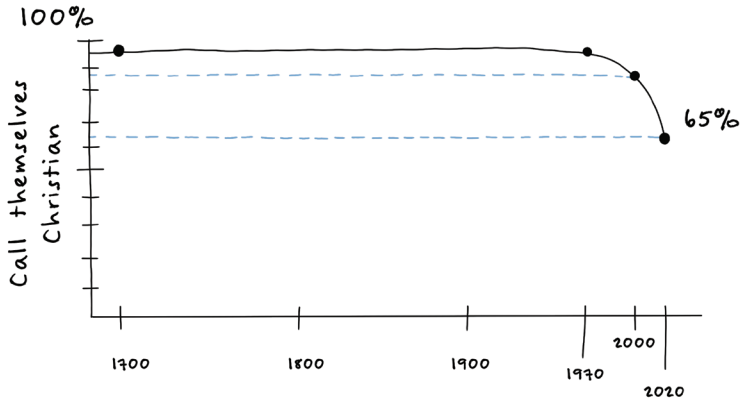
I actually don’t remember how I answered, but I do remember how I felt: stupid. Nobody had asked me that question so directly before, and I was embarrassed that I wasn’t ready with a good answer. So I went looking for one. I started asking questions and digging for answers. What I found blew my mind. Because what I discovered was a Church filled with treasure upon treasure upon treasure. I couldn’t believe it. The more questions I’d ask and the deeper I’d go, the more satisfying the answers became. I was in awe at what I found. From then on, I was all in.

In stark contrast, and at the exact same time, so many of my peers were getting asked this same question (sometimes explicitly, but most often implicitly, by the world): What’s keeping you in the Church? Yet their response was very different. They were getting less and less committed to their faith, finding it irrelevant, outdated, uninteresting, or outright incompatible with the life they wanted to live. When I would speak to them about why they were drifting away, it became immediately clear that they had no idea what they were leaving.

Where I saw the greatest treasures of humankind, they saw yesterday's news. How could we each be seeing the same thing so differently? How can the same message sound so different to different people?

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

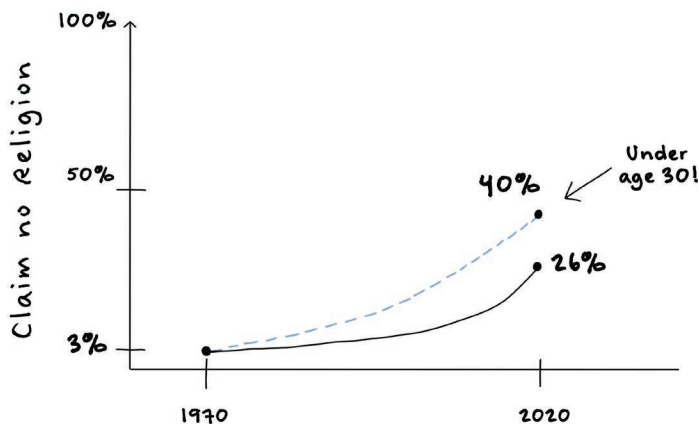
Consider this graph showing the percentage of Americans calling themselves Christian:



For most of our country's history, well over 90% of our people called themselves Christian. In 1970, it was still around 90%, having held very steady for centuries. But by 2000, only thirty years later, it had suddenly dropped to 80%, a dramatic shift from the previous few hundred years. Today, only twenty more years later, it's down still dramatically further to 65%. Not only are Americans rapidly becoming less Christian, but we are doing so

at an increasing rate. This is happening across all demographics and denominations, but especially among young people.

Consider it from the angle of those who now claim “no religion.”



Fifty years ago, only 3% of people claimed no religious affiliation. Today, the number is 26% (more than eight times larger). Far more troubling, for those under age thirty, a whopping 40% claim no religious affiliation. Even more sobering, these graphs are really only showing the lagging indicators of more meaningful metrics, like actual Sunday church attendance or whether people are authentically living Christian lives, which all measure worse still.

But we are not going to spend this book diving into depressing statistics that only confirm what you already know. Instead, I'm going to give you some key insights that will help turn things around.

IT'S A COMMUNICATION PROBLEM

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

—C.S. Lewis

Christianity offers infinite joy and the only way to overcome death. It is a smart religion, with tremendous intellectual and spiritual richness and depth. It offers helpful and genius insights into every aspect of life, both personal and societal. It is literally the greatest treasure fathomable. But the world increasingly rejects it anyway. Why do people continue to drift away in record numbers? Why don't they know what they're leaving? Because it hasn't been communicated to them. Our message, quite simply, has not gotten through.

It's not enough to simply possess valuable treasure and smart ideas. We must also be able to communicate what we have to

others in smart ways. And we must learn to do so amidst a noisy and quickly evolving media landscape that is increasingly working against us. At the core of the Christian mission is the need to communicate.

THE SACRED WORK

Communication is not one task among many, nor only the work of one department or person. It is an essential skill for every leader. And it is sacred work.

The definition of *communicate* is to give, to impart, or to transmit something in order that you might share it in common. Its Latin root (*communicare*) means to make common, to share, or to join with. The very purpose of communication is to bring about communion. The strength of every community is built upon successful communication—the sharing of something in common. Our church communities are crumbling because the common bonds that we share have grown weaker and are losing out to other, stronger cultural forces.

All genuine communication of truth is sacred, since it leads to the sharing in common of Truth himself (Jesus), a community we call the Church. But remember, communication is not simply proclaiming things. To have communicated something is to have it successfully received by the person on the other end (i.e., to share it in common). Too often we say a lot but communicate little. And

without successful communication you have no community, no communion, no Church, no Body of Christ.

This is the sacred work of every leader in the Church and the means by which we seek to fulfill Jesus' prayer that we may all be one (John 17:21). To communicate is sacred work, and it is your work.

QUITTING

Soon after those life-changing experiences, I quit my job as a computer engineer and went on a mission to build a more connected Church—a Church that knows how to communicate and share its treasures. I wanted to make sure everyone knew the answer to the question “What’s keeping you in the Church?” There were many years of hard lessons to be learned and tough sacrifices to be made, and I had the challenge of sorting through the vast array of ever-evolving communication techniques and technologies to figure out what really works. But our team persisted and built Flocknote, an award-winning, employee-owned software company with record growth and a community of 200,000+ church leaders and over 10,000 churches.

Another lesson I learned, however, is that tools will only take you so far. Though Flocknote created an amazing software tool (for communication, member database management, online payments, and more), solving the deeper, more fundamental challenge—making sure our message successfully makes it

through—takes more than just having the right tools. It takes leaders who know how to use them. It takes great communicators.

Over these many years, I've seen thousands of churches succeed and many others flounder. I've personally spent twenty years on various pastoral councils, leading ministries at my own church, traveling all over the country speaking to thousands of church leaders, leading conferences, podcasting, blogging, writing books, and creating innovative media projects that have reached hundreds of thousands of people—all while getting to lead a successful, fast-growing team of mission-driven people here at Flocknote. I've seen both what works and what common mistakes hold churches back.

The good news? Most all of it can be fixed.

GET READY

No matter which department you work in, how high (or low) you are on the totem pole, how tech-savvy you are, or how long you've been at it, I believe you and your team will find something in this book that will help you grow as leaders and communicators. The first major part of this book focuses on the big foundational ideas that successful communicators and leaders should understand. If we get these foundational parts right, the rest is easy. If we get these wrong, the rest doesn't matter. I believe the main reasons people today are leaving the faith in record numbers—while having no idea what treasures they are leaving behind—have more to do

with the foundational issues in part I of this book than the practical lessons found in part II. So even though you may already be familiar with some of the key ideas in part I, it is worth revisiting them to assess how well your team is doing. Once you address those, all the lessons in the second part of the book become much more relevant and powerful.

You are doing inspiring, important, and sacred work. You should know that everything in this book I learned from many years of observing, working with, and listening to leaders just like you. It is a privilege to share it all with you here, and I pray it is a blessing to you and your ministry.

READING TIPS

- Grab your highlighter or favorite writing utensil. Mark this book up as you read, dog-ear pages, and take notes!
- Consider getting ten copies of the book and giving one to each of your staff and other ministry leaders.
- Ask each person to read it (which only takes a few hours), take notes, and come prepared to your next team meeting ready to discuss. Before you begin, quickly answer the following questions (don't overthink them, just whatever immediately comes to mind):
 - ▶ What's keeping you in the Church?
 - ▶ What are your big goals this year as a church or ministry?